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Early Learning Investments in Washington State: *Summary of Findings*

Presentation to the
Early Learning Council

April 2006

Focus Group Methodology

- Eight focus group discussion sessions conducted February 1st and 2nd, 2006:
 - Kirkland: Middle SES Parents and Low SES Moms
 - Seattle: Opinion Leaders
 - Pasco: Hispanic Parents and Opinion Leaders
 - Spokane: Opinion Leaders, Middle SES Moms and Low SES Parents

Challenges in the Early Years

- There was wide awareness that the zero to five years are critical in child development
- Obtaining good quality childcare was a leading concern of parents and recognized by opinion leaders as a major challenge facing parents
- There was consensus among parents and opinion leaders that preparing a child for kindergarten was one of a parent's most important responsibilities
 - Social skills were perceived as the most important skill set for children to have upon entering kindergarten
 - Children who start kindergarten unprepared were perceived to hold up the learning of those who were prepared
- There was little awareness of what percentage of children actually show up prepared

Quality Care Outside the Home -1

- Childcare decisions are often driven by economics, followed by security and flexibility concerns
 - As a result, family/friend care situations are common
 - For most, a learning component is secondary in the selection process
- Affordability of pre-school was a topic of great concern for all parents
 - Many low SES parents worry about “making ends meet” and having to “work to pay for day care”
 - Middle SES parents are very concerned that their income status has “left them hanging” because they make too much to qualify for state help with their children’s early learning programs, but cannot afford the programs on their own

Quality Care Outside the Home -2

- Parents and opinion leaders saw the advantages of learning experiences before kindergarten
 - Many parents were aware that these opportunities are available in their communities, but such programs were considered too expensive
- Many parents made a clear distinction between what they considered “daycare” vs. what they considered “pre-school”
 - Safety and cost concerns applied equally to both, but daycare was more aligned with babysitting, with lower expectations, especially in the area of learning components

Making the Case for High Quality Early Learning

- Data showing the value of quality early childhood learning programs increased perceptions of the importance of such programs among parents and opinion leaders
- Among the most persuasive arguments:
 - Less than half of kindergarten students are “school ready”
 - Among the lowest-income classrooms, just 25% are “school ready”
 - Early learning programs strengthen families by giving parents the resources and support they need
 - There is a long-term return on investment of high quality early learning

State Involvement in Early Learning Programs -1

- Opinion leaders were initially divided over state involvement, some saw it as beneficial, while others were skeptical or even opposed
 - Some were concerned about the cost, while others saw it as too intrusive on parental responsibility. Others thought it was a good idea
- Not all parents were initially supportive of state involvement
 - However, most of the hesitancy was due to the fact that this was a new idea for most, rather than outright opposition
- There was consensus support among parents for state involvement in setting quality standards
 - A variety of standards were acknowledged and most indicated judging quality would be difficult

State Involvement in Early Learning Programs -2

- Parents and opinion leaders were hesitant to endorse universal pre-school, most wanted more information before committing themselves to the concept
 - There were a variety of concerns, ranging from “too much, too early” for children that age, concern over whether pre-school education was the parent’s responsibility, or that the parents needed time to think it over
- There was no consensus among parents whether all day kindergarten or a pre-kindergarten quality learning program was best for their children
 - Many simply didn’t have an opinion about what was best
- There was only limited awareness of Governor Gregoire’s “Washington Learns” program among parents and opinion leaders
 - Both audiences were skeptical about what they knew of the program

Reactions to Other Players

- The efforts of foundations and charitable organizations were welcome in the early learning arena,
 - There was some skepticism about their ability to make a difference alone

Message Delivery

Based on the reactions of the participants in these eight focus groups, we recommend the following steps:

1. Articulate what is at stake for early learning
2. Use simple statistics to heighten the sense of urgency and create motivation for action
3. Bridge the gap between “what should happen” and “what people already know”
4. Keep parents in the picture
5. Emphasize the message “pay now or pay later”
6. Emphasize local and community-based programs

1. Articulate What is at Stake for Early Learning

- There is a clear value in articulating a defining purpose and goal that creates a sense of what's at stake in early learning
- Focus group respondents readily embrace the goal of "making sure that children start kindergarten ready to learn and succeed in school to their full potential"
 - They easily acknowledge that the kinds of experiences children have in the years leading up to kindergarten can significantly affect their chances of achieving this goal

2. Use Simple Statistics to Heighten the Sense of Urgency and Create Motivation for Action

- The perception of urgency around early education is heightened when respondents are provided simple statistics that speak to significant unmet needs in the state. For example, the vast majority of respondents found the following “problem statement” to speak compellingly about why the status quo is not acceptable:

“A recent study by Washington State University shows that less than half of kindergarten students in Washington were assessed by their teachers to be ready for school and, in the lowest-income classrooms, just 25% of kindergarten students were ‘school ready.’ Studies show that children who start school behind are likely to continue to be behind throughout their school years.”

- Both parts of this statement – the large number of children who are not “school ready” when they start kindergarten, and the lasting academic consequences for these children – play an important function in creating a motivation for action
- This argument is even stronger among those who already understand that kindergarten has changed significantly over the past twenty years to become much more of an academic year; that is, that kindergarten is an important year in preparing children for success in elementary school

3. Bridge the Gap Between “What Should Happen” and “What People Already Know”

- The best descriptions of what should happen to children in early learning settings are the ones that comport with respondents’ intuitive sense of the skills that children need to be successful in kindergarten and the primary grades
 - Specifically, there is widespread recognition that children benefit when they are in environments that teach them how to succeed in a group setting – to listen to a teacher’s instructions, respect and cooperate with other children, and exercise self-discipline – and that motivate them to be successful problem solvers. (The need to develop cognitive skills in very young children is a matter of some controversy, or at least uncertainty, among respondents)
- Importantly, respondents think of “childcare” programs and “pre-school” programs very differently and while there is a greater presumption that the later (pre-school programs) make a more deliberate effort to focus on some of these school-preparation skills, respondents do not yet make the same judgment about childcare programs (which they see as functioning primarily to keep children safe and satisfy their most basic care needs while their parents are at work)
- As a result, a conscious effort to describe and qualify “childcare” programs as “high quality” provides an important frame in discussing the potential benefits of these programs

4. Keep Parents in the Picture

- The successful narrative about the value of investing in early education should be careful to keep parents clearly in the picture – indeed; it should make sure parents are front and center in the picture
- Focus group respondents believe that parents ultimately are responsible for the education and welfare of their children, and they do not support policies that they perceive will undermine parental accountability
 - Indeed, respondents put a high premium on early education programs that include a parental education component and give parents opportunities to be involved with their child's care, while recognizing that parents need additional help and support
- It is critical to frame early education programs as a way to strengthen families and as a means of supporting parents who are seeking the best for their children

5. Emphasize the Message “Pay Now or Pay Later”

- Focus group respondents often describe the choice about investing in early education by saying, “you can pay now or you can pay later,” and pro-early education messages should reflect this intuition
- Respondents find it both important and credible that investments in early education more than pay for themselves in the long term through decreased special education costs, lower crime rates, and reduced dependence on public welfare and other social programs
- While there is power in the idea that investing in early education helps improve K-12 schools, respondents are not yet receptive to the claim that early education is a more valuable investment than other aspects of education. The case will need to be made to connect early learning with success in school and reductions in negative outcomes for children

6. Emphasize Local and Community-Based Programs

- Focus group respondents are more apt to be supportive of early childhood learning programs that emphasize local and community-based programs, rather than more large-scale, statewide programs
 - Local programs are seen as being more responsive to individual family needs, more able to include a parental involvement component, as well as more committed to increasing quality and efficiency
- Additionally, utilization of current resources and infrastructure, rather than “starting from the ground up” can be leveraged as a cost-saving element